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McHenry had just had lunch with Federal Reserve Board Chairman Ben Bernanke, a fact he was pointing out to some of his colleagues on the House floor. "I just called him," McHenry told Campbell.

Shortly thereafter, Campbell would be discussing monetary policy with Bernanke over breakfast in a Reserve Board conference room that boasts a stunning view of the Jefferson Memorial and the Washington Monument.

Bernanke has been dealing with turmoil in the financial markets, most notably the collapse of Bear Stearns in March and, more recently, troubles plaguing Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. But he has found time to reach out to Capitol Hill lawmakers, who say the 54-year-old's accessibility has been greater than that of Alan Greenspan, his predecessor.

For lobbyists and other Washington insiders, securing a meeting with a member of Congress is a big catch. And conversely, many lawmakers covet face-time with one of the most powerful

financial figures in the world.

During the 110th Congress, getting an audience with Bernanke hasn't been hard for members. In fact, some say Bernanke's office has initiated some of the meetings.

From July of 2007 through April of this year, Bernanke had more than two dozen private discussions with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, including meetings with groups on the Hill such as the Blue Dog Coalition and the Congressional Black Caucus.

The Hill obtained Bernanke's schedule through Freedom of Information Act requests.

Bernanke is in regular contact with Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.), who heads the Banking Committee, and House Financial Services Committee Chairman Barney Frank (D-Mass.), who talks with Bernanke about twice a month.

Even though he was nominated for the post by President Bush, Democrats give Bernanke high marks.

In many ways, Bernanke's arrival — which coincided with the Democrats taking control of Congress in early 2007 — was well-timed.

Greenspan is widely respected, having served in both Republican and Democratic administrations, but his fiscal views irritated congressional Democrats in recent years. That frustration boiled over in 2005 when Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) called Greenspan “a political hack.”

Frank said Greenspan's politics are to the right of Bernanke's, asserting that Bernanke has placed more emphasis on consumer protections during his short tenure.

Rep. Michael Capuano (D-Mass.), a Financial Services Committee member, said that Bernanke's stance on taxes is more in line with congressional Democrats than Greenspan's was.

“We won't always agree, but Bernanke respects what our role is,” Capuano said.

Greenspan, through a spokeswoman, disputed claims that he did not have an open-door policy with the legislative branch.

Greenspan said, "I do not recall ever turning down a meeting request from a member of Congress."

While many members compared Greenspan to Bernanke, some of them pointed out that Bernanke is in the early stages of his reign. Most members of Congress were not in Washington when Greenspan's first term started in 1987.

The topics tackled during the high-powered meetings with Bernanke varied, lawmakers say, but it isn't always about the financial markets, inflation and interest rates. Capuano said he and Bernanke talked about their mutual love for the Red Sox last fall as Boston was on its way to winning the World Series.

McHenry said he discussed some Southern history with Bernanke, who was raised in South Carolina.

While Federal Reserve chairmen have to choose their public words carefully — the world's markets are hanging on every one of them — lawmakers say that Bernanke is not as guarded behind closed doors.

Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), the ranking member on the Budget Committee who met with Bernanke in February, said the chairman is "very direct." Likewise, Campbell characterized

Bernanke's style as "remarkably direct" when the microphones are off.

Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.) said Bernanke "listened intently" to his views on the economy, though Bernanke was careful not to endorse Meeks's contention that the nation is in a recession.

In January, Bernanke had a photo-op with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Reid. Months later, Bernanke held a photo-op with Republican leaders.

Other members who have met or had private conversations with Bernanke include Sens. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), Tim Johnson (D-S.D.), Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) and Jon Tester (D-Mont.), and Reps. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.), John Spratt (D-S.C.), Jeb Hensarling (R-Texas), Scott Garrett (R-N.J.) and Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.).

Bernanke has met with groups representing both the left and right of the political spectrum, as well as powerful industry associations and consumer groups.

Ed Yingling, head of the American Bankers Association, got together with Bernanke last year and found him to be very inquisitive.

"He gives you the impression he loves to absorb information," Yingling said, adding that Bernanke asked many questions seeking to gather data about the state of the economy.

Other groups Bernanke met with include Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH coalition, the National Center for Policy Analysis, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Citigroup, the National Association of Home Builders, AARP, the World Bank, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs and the National Consumer Law Center.

Over the past year, Bernanke has had lunch with Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Greenspan. Many foreign leaders also have sought Bernanke's time. For example, he had breakfast with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in April.

By far, the person Bernanke has consulted with the most is Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, the man who — like Bernanke — has faced some of the toughest decisions to remedy the economic difficulties facing the United States.

Bernanke's schedule showed he did not come into the office on the federal holiday of Martin Luther King Jr. Day but was working during the weekends following the collapse of Bear Stearns.

A week after the Bear Stearns news became public, Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), who had clinched the GOP presidential nomination a few weeks earlier, called Bernanke and had a 15-minute discussion with him, according to the chairman's schedule.

A Board spokesman said, "Chairman Bernanke seeks the views of a wide variety of people and groups, including members of Congress from both sides of the aisle and representatives of business and consumer organizations."